

1997

## Concrete [Beton]

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### Recommended Citation

Axelrod, Mark. "Concrete [Beton]." *Babel Guide to German Fiction in English Translation*. Eds. Ray Keenoy, Mike Mitchell, and Maren Meinhardt. London: Boulevard Books, 1997. 24-25. Web.

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in a haircut or a shave. Many people said he let his red hair grow so long out of religious piety, but I know better; it was out of stinginess, nothing else. Ah well, never mind, mustn't speak ill of the dead, Balabusne always had a good selection, cigars, pipes, cigarette cases with little flowers, gold-tipped cigarettes for the rich, always tried to persuade us to take a more expensive brand but we stuck with 'Excelsior'. And the stand with the little gas flame and the cigar cutter on the counter, the brass stand he was always polishing when one went into his shop, it's that brass stand one always remembers in thinking back to the old days, though we only bought tobacco from him once a week at most and never used the stand.' p91-2

BERNHARD  
Thomas

### Concrete [Beton]

Thomas Bernhard's work has been labelled 'gloomy' or 'bilious' or 'pessimistic' and not out of keeping with a tradition of what the Germans call *Weltschmerz* or 'world despair', a notion with roots in Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*. But this denies the value of Bernhard's work because he is also preoccupied with the notion of perfection and his characters not only exhaust themselves with the relative absurdity of the human condition, but also obsess about perfecting something which they perceive is dear to them. This tack is found in much, if not all of Bernhard's work, and *Concrete* is no exception.

In *Concrete* the protagonist, a wealthy yet sickly forty-five-year old independent scholar, steeped in Austrian angst, suffers dreadfully from his mid-life crisis and insists on producing the 'penultimately perfect' work on Mendelssohn. What we discover is his total inability to ever begin this book on Mendelssohn let alone complete it. While he is attempting to discover just how to begin the work, which he has begun and abandoned numerous times, he is constantly 'digressing' on things that annoy him — most of which concern the social manners of the Austrians — and also on whether or not to take a trip to Spain to avoid the chill of an Austrian winter. In a manner not unlike Thomas Mann in *Death in Venice*, Bernhard finally takes his protagonist to Palma, a place he has visited before, at which point he meets a woman who tells him the most tragic story about her life and how her husband, whom she convinced to quit his job as a civil engineer and begin an independent business, was found dead, lying on the concrete sidewalk of their hotel the apparent victim of either a suicide or an accident. At that point, concrete itself becomes a

kind of character and is constantly referred to in relation to death. The protagonist muses about this woman and whatever became of her and the climax of the novel reveals that in her despair and guilt over her husband's death, she committed suicide and was buried, in concrete, along with her husband in the Palma cemetery.

This book, like many of Bernhard's novels, is written in the first person, as a reminiscence, and in one long paragraph which lends a kind of raving, 'mad' quality to the work, something which Bernhard often alludes to. Certainly, Bernhard is not reading for the 'faint of heart or spirit' as his work can be both a diatribe and didactic, but the writing is superb and his vision of the human condition is exceedingly persuasive. M R A

'And above all we always overrate whatever we plan to do, for, if the truth were known, every intellectual work, like every other work, is grossly overrated, and there is no intellectual work in the generally overrated world which could not be dispensed with, just as there is no person, and hence no intellect, which cannot be dispensed with in his world: everything could be dispensed with if only we had the strength and the courage'. p28

BERNHARD  
Thomas

### Cutting Timber [Holzfällen]

Bernhard is magnificently sour and in a self-confessedly 'artistic' milieu of Vienna, a city that grew to be far too big for its boots, provincialism piles upon pretension and Bernhard etches it all down with the acid of his gaze. In this extraordinary novel, set almost entirely over two succeeding events; a funeral and a dinner-party, he utterly takes apart a little world of idlers who exist on the fringes of any professional achievement but who nevertheless espouse enormous artistic and social snobbery. The curious and fascinating thing about Bernhard's work is how he puts over his profoundly bilious viewpoint with such an enjoyable humour and narrative drive — he's been called 'both repellent and addictive' for this accomplishment.

Unfortunately though the dinner party at the salon of the shiftless Auersbergers — who live entirely off the proceeds of inherited money — is also an accurate microcosm for the larger world and these 'perfidious social masturbators' with their false lives and false goals seem quite a widely spread type anywhere money, laziness and snobbery coexist. Amongst the guests at